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Drug underworld makes an offer Colombia can refuse

By Roger Fontaine
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Colombian officials have rejected an extraordinary offer from 65 alleged narcotics traffickers to pay off the country's foreign debt if the government helps them avoid extradition to the United States.

The suspected drug dealers, in jail awaiting extradition, offered not only to pay the \$13.5 billion debt, but also to return capital held for them in foreign banks and surrender their jungle laboratories used to refine co-

caine out of coca paste. In return, they asked to be prosecuted in Colombia, expecting more lenient treatment at home.

The suspected traffickers' offer, made in an open letter to local news media earlier this month, was called "absurd and illegal" by Colombian Justice Minister Enrique Parejo Gonzales.

"I do not know about their intentions," he told the Bogota daily *El Tiempo*, "but we are engaged in an all-out struggle against the drug traffickers. Therefore we cannot as-

sume a bland position with such a dangerous organization."

The government's refusal to bargain with the country's leading drug figures, coming just before Sunday's presidential election, was not expected to boost the flagging campaign of the ruling Conservative Party candidate, Alvaro Gomez Hurtado.

The Liberal Party's candidate, Virgilio Barco Vargas, holds a commanding lead, according to the polls, and a State Department official said the government's war on cocaine

traffickers "is not an issue."

U.S. officials believe Colombia's cocaine exports to the United States reached a peak of 48 to 53 tons in 1984. Since then, the amount has fallen as Colombian authorities stepped up their efforts at coca eradication and dismantling of the drug infrastructure.

Mr. Parejo Gonzalez' predecessor, Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, is strongly suspected to have been assassinated by drug dealers two years ago in Bogota — a charge which the alleged traffickers specifically denied in

their open letter.

They also denounced the 1980 U.S.-Colombian extradition treaty, saying: "We cannot understand why Colombia, a sovereign, democratic, and independent country, has to resort to foreign and exotic laws to prosecute its nationals.

"It is almost incredible to have to accept the fact that, because of the mere statement of individuals who have infiltrated our country [Drug Enforcement Agency agents], we are turned over to foreign judges, so they can quench their thirst for re-

venge with us, Colombians."

Other such offers have been made by Colombian drug dealers in the past — one in Mexico City to former Colombian President Alfonso Lopez Michelson and another to Colombian Attorney General Carlos Jimenez in Panama City.

Many dealers have been known to cooperate with Marxist guerrillas, who provide protection in exchange for arms purchased with earnings from the sale of narcotics, according

to U.S. intelligence sources.

One guerrilla group, the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces, better known by its acronym FARC, recently prevented an airplane with journalists on board from landing near a cocaine processing laboratory that had been surrounded by Colombian police.

Three of the country's seven known guerrilla groups signed a truce with the government in May 1984 that allowed them to organize politically. But FARC is the only one now abiding by that agreement because it had some success in the congressional elections last March and is participating in the upcoming presidential election.

FARC's followers, however, remain armed and continue to control

their zones of influence in the countryside.

"Anyone poking around their territory is going to have problems," said one administration official.

The other two guerrilla armies have rejected or broken the truce and, along with the non-signing guerrilla bands, have resumed armed attacks on government forces. The best known of these, the M-19, is supported by both Cuba and Nicaragua.

M-19 carried out a bloody attack on the Palace of Justice in downtown Bogota last November. More than a hundred people, including 12 Supreme Court justices, died in the subsequent shootout. It also effectively killed President Betancur's attempts to negotiate a permanent truce with the guerrilla groups, since the so-called "peace process" lost most of its previous public support.